Synopsis

Title:

Contested Territories: Genre, Gender and Nation in Alice Walker and Leslie Marmon Silko

This thesis is a comparative study of the selected novels of Alice Walker and Leslie Marmon Silko. Their novels are analysed as narrative representations of the African American and Native American worldviews. Critical manifestations of the concepts of genre, gender and nation in the two writers are specifically examined.

Alice Walker is the best representative of contemporary African American women's writing that explores the vistas of fictional narration. Her novels and poems are studied from perspectives related to gender, nation and history in the present thesis. The dissertation focuses particularly on the way Walker narrates the role of women as history makers and nation builders, and urges women to know the power of their selves, their body, and their language.

Leslie Marmon Silko is a prominent Native American writer whose novels are as significant as her non-fictional works. She is known for her affinity with Native American myths and folktales. Like Walker, Silko too underlines the power of women in her narratives. Her heroines are revolutionary characters who are portrayed as engaging in a journey to reclaim the lost history and the lost voice of the common people.

The study is divided into five chapters including the Introduction and the Conclusion. The novels that are discussed include *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* (1970), *The Color Purple* (1982), *Possessing the Secret of Joy* (1992) and *By the Light of My Father's Smile* (1998) written by Walker and *Ceremony* (1977), *Storyteller* (1981), *Almanac of the Dead* (1991) and *Gardens in the Dunes* (1999) by Silko.

The three core chapters of the dissertation are analyses of the novels based on the theoretical formulations of genre, gender and nation. 'Genre' as a critical concept refers to the stylistic, structural, and thematic conventions that distinguish one type of narrative from another and carries with it the assumptions and ideologies that control the narrative. Against mainstream approaches that prescribe rigid boundaries for genres, the novels of Walker and Silko are instances of merging of disparate registers, contested stories and multiple discourses that often make genre subdivisions irrelevant. The novels under analysis make use of verse pieces, letters, diary pages, maps, photographs and stories, all of which together bring about the kind of generic fluidity that is the hallmark of the two novelists.

Gender, the second theoretical concept that this study looks into is a cultural construct inscribed in the "political unconscious" of discourses. Walker and Silko reconstruct the historical 'othering' of women by politicising the act of writing. In spite of the gendered world and its binaries, women writers resuscitate untold histories through generic reinventions. Walker and Silko make subversive use of gender categories to reclaim their authority to speak for themselves and their past, and in this process free the narrative voice from the grip of Euro-American authority. Readers come across a plethora of voices and listen to stories from multiple perspectives in the novels of these two writers.

The third concept upon which the study relies is that of the nation. The construct of nation is inseparable from one's identity and culture. A nation's legitimacy depends upon the

repeated narration of its myths and stories, and the shared set of narratives that encompass both inclusions and exclusions. The inclusions are the inscribed historical documents, whereas, the exclusions are the tales of unremitting labour and oppression, of pain and insult. It is against the hegemonic narratives of American history that Walker and Silko offer their counter narratives. They look at the concept of nation as one which has to be re-visioned as a cultural whole.

The introductory chapter looks at how Walker and Silko offer counter narratives of American history through their novels and briefly discusses how the novels analysed are regarded as sites of contestation in relation to genre, gender and nation. It also gives a brief background to the works of these writers.

The second chapter, "Engendering Genre," examines how the novels taken for analysis experiment with the idea of a fictional genre. It also examines how the writers deal with various narrative themes while reworking the concept of genre. Walker and Silko resort to generic manipulations involving the inclusions of other traditional, historical and cultural discourses like stories, myths, songs, and photographs into the narrative to present their argument.

In the third chapter, "Gender Identities," the generic and national constructs are reconstituted in terms of gender. The chapter looks at how gender has politicized the act of writing. It shows how women writers make use of their gender insights to reinterpret the nation and its histories. African American and Native American literature looks at gender as a historically modulated paradigm encoding multiple marginalities, double oppression, ethnicities and contested nationalities. The works of Walker and Silko look at gender as an all-encompassing reality that can be productively adapted for reclaiming one's lost space. The two writers raise their voice against multiple oppressions related to race, colour, and

gender, and also speak for the cause of women, children and men. Walker and Silko thus exhibit an androgynous vision in their narrative.

The fourth chapter, "Nations within the Nation," looks at the reconstruction of nation through the interpretation of stories and myths. The novels under discussion break the continuity of history by presenting suppressed voices and silenced histories. The chapter also analyses how Walker and Silko question the western metaphysics of totality, universality, and self agreement, and thereby how they revise and remodel nationalistic histories. This chapter attempts to reconsider some of the significant themes and conceptualizations of African American and Native American historiography.

The concluding chapter looks at how Walker and Silko are involved in the rewriting of history from a perspective that is different from those of Euro American narrators. The chapter also examines how Walker and Silko cross the boundaries of historical positioning and discrimination that make them invisible. It gives a thematic summary of each chapter and also looks at the narrative strategies employed by these writers to portray the female subject and the reality they experience.